

Athens to Amsterdam

**Rescuing a Vintage BMW
Motorcycle in 1991**

Derrick King



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Back Cover: Bilderdam, Netherlands 1994

You must ride it slow.
—Vangelis Isidorou

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1971

Vintage motorcycles—pre-1969 BMWs in hand-pinstriped black—are beautiful the way a Volkswagen Beetle is beautiful. I had wanted one for years, perhaps to compensate for the elegant R60/2 I couldn't afford in 1971 when I was a student riding a Honda 350. The Honda was powerful enough to give me a taste of touring but wasn't powerful or comfortable enough to be good at highway cruising.



When BMW riders meet, they become friends.

In lion country near Mt. Kilimanjaro we met Russ of Salt Lake City. We rode the African veldt together for seven weeks before our trails parted in Rhodesia.

Later Arlene and I received a letter from our friend, Russ Scoville, Associate Director of the Peace Corps in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia:

"... When I left you at Karla Dam I continued south to Basutoland and Swaziland before riding north again towards East Africa and Ethiopia. Seventeen thousand miles in four months. I carried full camping gear and a week's supply of food. My R27 needed only a speedometer cable, a set of points, a spark plug, and a front fender job (my fault) during that period."

From Danny Liska's diary of his trip from the North Cape in Norway to the South Cape at the Southern tip of Africa—40,000 miles on his BMW R60.

SEE YOUR NEAREST AUTHORIZED BMW DEALER OR FOR INFORMATION WRITE TO:
ENZY RUTHER & SAMPSON, INC., 140 WEST 43RD STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10018
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In the 1970s, progressive motorcyclists thought BMW "old-styles" were ugly antiques. Not many bikers still wanted them, other than the Shriners. BMW bike dealer Philip Funnell Motorcycles Ltd. in Vancouver, Canada wanted those six-volt dinosaurs as trade-ins on new BMWs little more than it welcomed British big bikes with their Whitworth bolts and the many Japanese "rice-burners" with soft and strippable Philips screws.

But I craved an old BMW, one cylinder or two, because they were elegant, simple, and reliable—the only bikes in those days that *were*

truly reliable—you could safely ride them to the ends of the earth.

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A few years later, Peter Fonda, of “Easy Rider” fame, told me “the best bike I ever owned was my R27 ... that BMW would purr forever and ever.”



1991

I was in Athens in June on one of what was to be many business trips.



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I was surprised to see “old-style” BMW motorcycles on the streets. This was because the Greeks were some of the first Gastarbeiters (guest workers) in postwar Germany. They helped to reconstruct the country in the 1950s and 1960s. Most eventually repatriated, some riding home on a BMW motorcycle. They were still riding them a generation later as everyday transportation. Most looked restorable but few looked well maintained.



On a spring morning in 1991 the owner of an R25 single-cylinder BMW approached me as I admired his masterpiece parked on the sidewalk near the Agora. He spoke English so we had a chat. I asked him where he got the motorcycle. He told me that he recently bought it at a shop at the other end of Athens that restores old BMWs. He offered me a ride, so off I went on the back of his vintage thumper on a ten kilometer

helmetless ride through chaotic weekend traffic to Nikaia in the western suburbs. The shop turned out to be a family garage for pre-1970 BMWs, with customers stopping by on their vintage BMWs to chat with the friendly Isidorou brothers who owned the shop.

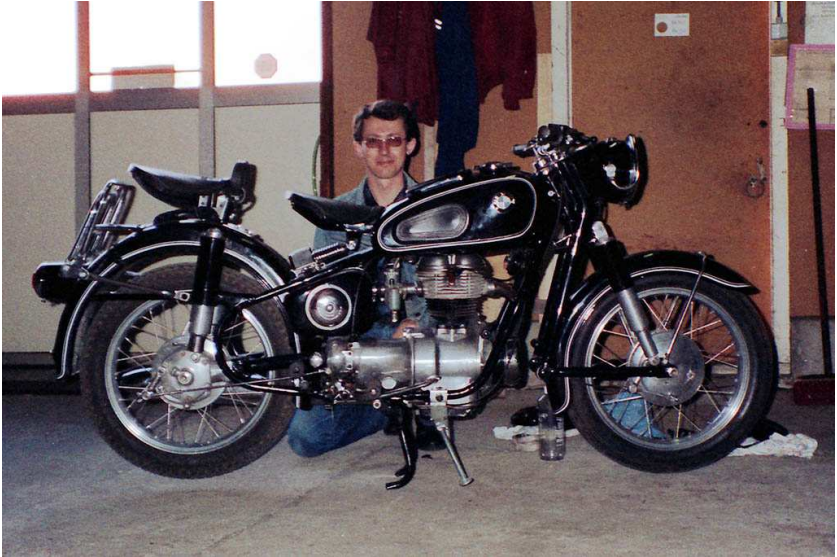
A restored mono-cylinder 1958 R26 was for sale, with an overhauled engine. It looked great, started on one kick, and ran well, at least as much as I could tell on crowded, bumpy residential streets during a short (so I wouldn't get lost) test ride. This was pre-Internet, so there was no way to do online pre-purchase research. The Isidorou brothers carefully pointed out a few parts that were obviously not original, such as the handlebar controls which were made of “unobtainium” even then. The \$3,500 price seemed fair, considering the apparently good condition.

Memories, dreams, reflections ... with the R25 rider acting as interpreter and advisor, I cut a deal with the brothers over Greek coffee (which is what everyone else calls Turkish coffee). *“He has new motor. For 2,000 km,”* brother Vangelis told me, *“you must ride it slow.”*

With the help of my Greek colleagues at work I hired a truck to haul my booty to KLM at Ellinikon Airport for shipment to Amsterdam where I was living at the time. At Greek customs, the officer filled out the export

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documents in Greek for me after I paid a \$150 bribe. It took months to complete the importation, inspection, VAT, and registration formalities in Amsterdam (the frame and the engine had different serial numbers) before I could put a license plate on it and take my wife for the inaugural ride.



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With the Dutch license plate and some fresh gasoline, off we went down the street—weaving all over the lane. “*Sit still!*” I shouted to my wife. “*I am sitting still!*” she shouted back, “*and I’m getting oil on my pants!*” I stopped when I realized the steering was too loose to ride the machine safely. I turned around and we limped home.

As my wife dismounted she seared the inside of her left leg. It turned out that the muffler had been relocated ten centimeters outwards to compensate for rebuilt but misaligned exhaust port threads on the cylinder head. Her leg still bears the scar from the muffler burn.

Not only were the steering head bearings loose, after just a few minutes of operation the bike was starting to leak oil from the cylinder head gasket. I removed the valve cover to retorque the head bolts and found four split lockwashers lying inside it next to the valve springs. I shuddered: lockwashers are not used in a BMW cylinder head! I removed the cylinder head to have a closer look.

The valve springs were so weak I could push the valves open with my thumbs. The spark plug threads had stripped and an insert had been installed which required the use of a long-reach spark plug; however, a short-reach spark plug had been installed in the long-reach socket so the exposed cylinder head threads were clogged with deposits. I was stunned at what I saw: the engine was a disaster. The closer I looked, the more depressed I became.

The cylinder head was warped. The cylinder wall was scored. Old-style BMWs didn’t have paper air filters and Athens air is not known for its purity. The cylinder had been bored out to maximum size, then a sleeve installed, and then the sleeve bored out to *its* maximum size; now that sleeve was scored and cracked. The piston rings were frozen in the piston grooves and there was half a millimeter of piston slap.

I removed the pushrods. Look at the brazing:



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Both pushrods had been repaired by brazing ball bearings onto one end, which meant that the oil could not flow through the hollow pushrods to lubricate the valve train as it should. A pushrod end as it should be on the left; a brazed pushrod end with a ball bearing as mine were on the right:



The engine cylinder, piston, and pushrods all had to be replaced. The pushrods were difficult to source and were amazingly expensive. I removed the engine and took it to expert Jules Erkelens, the “BMW One-Cylinder Specialist” in The Hague.

The two of us struggled to open the engine case because it had been glued together with gasket seal. The interior was black with deposits. Jules showed me how the cylinder head had been cut down to accept non-BMW valves; new springs, keepers, valves, valve guides, seats, and now shims were all needed. The front crankshaft bearing retainer was broken. The non-BMW timing chain links were too small so the BMW sprocket teeth were worn out and had to be replaced.

The engine bearings were Russian, with Cyrillic lettering. Some of the bearings were of the sealed type, so lubricating oil could not flow through them as it should. The generator commutator had been reground so many times that there was almost no copper left on the armature; the generator also needed replacement.

The only parts of the engine’s internals that were still in good condition were the oil pump and the connecting rod roller bearings. It was a miracle that *any* of the engine was in good condition, because the oil slinger (the ancestor of today’s oil pump) was detached from the crankshaft and therefore not working.

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While Jules rebuilt the engine with his special tools I mail-ordered service and parts manuals and worked on the frame, wheels, and suspension.



All the steering, suspension, and wheel bearings had to be replaced. The front and rear swingarms had been repainted while the bearing races were still mounted inside them, so that all four suspension bearings were full of rust and paint and incredibly worn. Here is one of them:



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The right rear suspension bearing had several millimeters of the outer race milled away in a half-moon shape by the drive shaft.

Both steering head bearings were worn out. The steering lock was from a Puch moped; it was too long and dragged on the steering column, making the steering stiff on one side. It had to be replaced. One front shock absorber had no damping at all so I replaced all four shock absorbers with brand new, and expensive, Koni units.

My R26 speedometer turned out to be from an R25, with the wrong ratio and a top speed indication of only 120, not 140 km/h (although the bike could not go anywhere near that fast); I replaced it. The ignition switch mount had been cut away to install a Czech replacement; the headlight bucket had to be replaced to allow installation of the authentic, and expensive, Bosch ignition and headlight switch.

The surrogate Werhle ignition coil and regulator from a Citroën 2CV needed to be replaced along with the *ersatz* wiring harness so that original electrical parts could be installed inside the engine front case where BMW intended them to be, instead of hung below the fuel tank. A new exhaust pipe and muffler were fitted after milling away 4mm from the wrongly-angled exhaust flange with a Dremel Moto-Tool.

The Pagusa pillion seat had the wrong base and had been mounted by drilling through the center of the fender, thus piercing and ruining the wiring harness to the taillight. To repair this, a new taillight wire had been strung along the fender stay, which in turn prevented the fender hinge from opening, which as a consequence prevented the rear wheel from being removed while the bike was on the stand.

The fender hinge pin had rusted solid and had to be drilled out, an operation that consumed several quarter-inch drill bits and a case of beer. The rear fender was then professionally patched (with bronze, not fiberglass) and repainted at an autobody shop.

More and more expensive vintage BMW parts were required, from rubber seals, levers, and cables to spokes (I used stainless steel) and wheel bearings. To my surprise all were available for a price, often a very high price. Jules had many new and used parts in his well-stocked basement. I mail-ordered some parts such as stock handlebar controls from Blue Moon Cycle, and sourced others with the help of the BMW Mono Club.

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My restoration project was a great way to meet friendly, like-minded people. In Holland, there are clubs for motorcycles, vintage motorcycles, BMW motorcycles, vintage BMW motorcycles, and even vintage BMW motorcycles with one cylinder—the BMW Mono Club.



Legendary Piet Mooi (the name means beautiful in Dutch) pinstriped the rear fender for me for only \$10. While I was in his tiny shop he was putting the finishing touches on this sparkling 1923 R32:



The front fender, tail light, and one of the aluminum footrest castings on this R32 above were fabricated by him. He was planning to sell this R32, in working order, for \$25,000.

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The BMW Mono Club was an invaluable source of information and advice in those pre-Internet days, although I struggled to read the club's 40-page magazine even with a Dutch-English dictionary.



1993

It took two years and thousands of dollars before the bike could be ridden safely. When it was completed it looked the same to most people but it ran like new, didn't leak, and was nearly all original, inside and out, down to the toolkit and tire pump. The Earles fork front suspension was wonderful.

Often I wished I had never bought that collection of multinational scrap, but after the ordeal was over I was glad I did! My restoration expenses divided by the hours I spent working on it cost me about the same as lying on an Aegean beach, but the real payoff was riding the finished old-timer that I had dismantled and reassembled with my own hands.

It was magical to ride the old 15 horsepower thumper on the scenic byways around Holland, mostly alone but sometimes with sibling bikes from the BMW Mono Club. Holland is mostly as flat as a Dutch pancake so the R26—the world's slowest 250cc motorcycle—had ample power on its back roads. A vintage European bike in Europe ... it *belonged* there.

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The bike attracted attention on the street and wherever it was parked.



The BMW R26 took me to the National Vintage Motorcycle Rally near Amsterdam. Indian Scouts, Indian Chiefs (one with original sidecar), Ariel Square fours, Matchless, Harley, Norton, Whizzer—you-name-it-it-was-there, being fired up and ridden. Hundreds of bikes. They sounded as great as they looked, and a red Indian Chief was, I think, the most beautiful bike I ever saw. My R26 was among friends.

The R26 took me to Eindhoven for the BMW Old-Timers Rally, strictly for BMWs made before 1969. It was at the other end of the country, just 60 km from the German border, so the R26 was almost back to its birthplace. It was a shakedown ride for the overhauled bike, and it ran perfectly for nearly 400 km that day in the cool sunshine. Our convoy of 100 vintage BMWs stretched about a kilometer down the road and attracted outsize attention as we putted by, blocking the cross traffic.

The oldest bike on the 85 km ride was a 1923 BMW R32. I rode next to it and it looked and sounded great. Our convoy rode 85 km together through narrow backroads which rarely see cars (only farm equipment), past lakes and canals to a picnic lunch in the forest before dispersing. It was like going back a generation or more through a time tunnel. It is a pity there were no digital photo or video cameras back then.

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These R26 rides left me with my fondest memories of Europe. I took these black-and-white photographs with a 1950s Kodak Brownie Six-20 Model C box camera on Kodak 120 negative film, for a moody vintage effect:



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Aalsmeer, near Amsterdam, shot with the Kodak Six-20 box camera:



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However, the restoration cost me much more than the bike and I spent far more time squatting beside it than sitting on it. Although I had always maintained my motorcycles myself, overhauling and restoring this “old-style” was a completely new experience. When parts wore out on other BMWs I simply fitted new parts; the motorcycles remained BMWs. During thirty years in Greece this R26 had so many substitute parts grafted onto it that BMW parts could now no longer be fitted without replacing other parts—because *right parts won't fit onto wrong parts*. Despite its appearance, I hadn't bought a BMW but a *Frankenbike* of mixed vintage. This bike taught me the difference between an overhaul and a restoration.

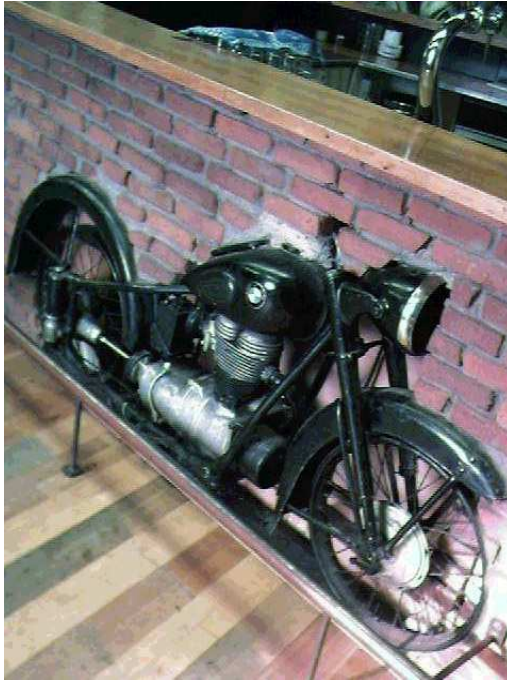
This was the worst un-seized vintage BMW engine Jules had ever seen, but he had some other engines in his workshop that were almost as bad. He showed me an R26 with an R27 crankshaft, which is a different size; in order make this work, the cylinder base had been shimmed 5mm, so that the carburetor and exhaust connections also had to be modified. He showed me an R25 with the muffler mounted on the right—a sidecar had previously been attached to it in a country where vehicles drive on the left; to make this work the exhaust port had been modified in such a way that the muffler could never be installed on the left side again. He showed me an R25 with a (burned out) Honda CB350 alternator.

A 1953 BMW R25 parked in front of a Bali, Indonesia bar:



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And, worse, another BMW R25 *inside* another Bali bar:



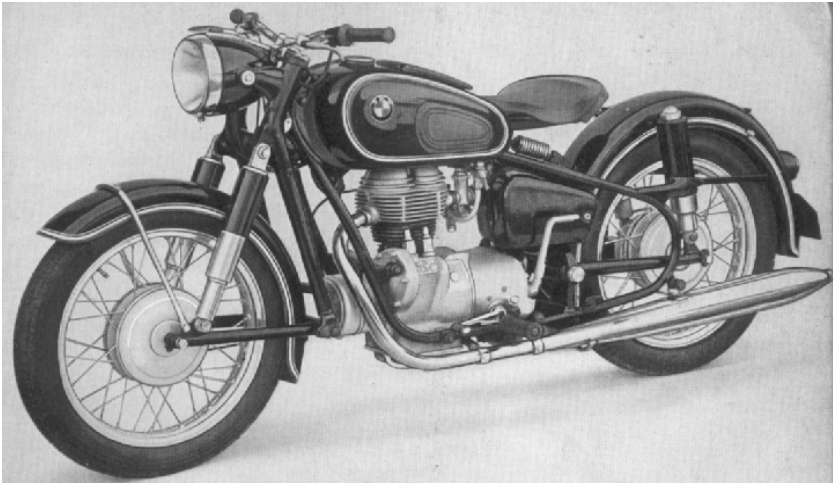
I am happy to have helped save a veteran from the disgraceful fate met by his brothers above, and I've left something of myself in that time machine.

1995

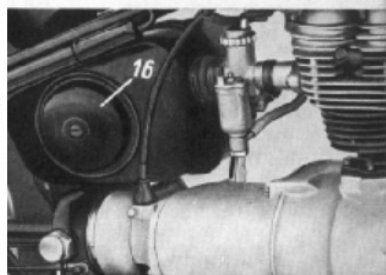
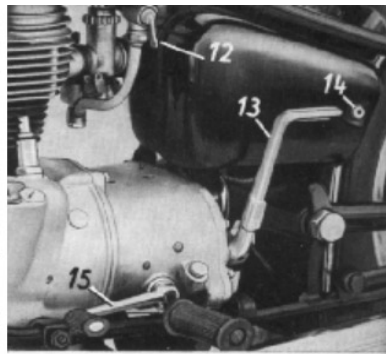
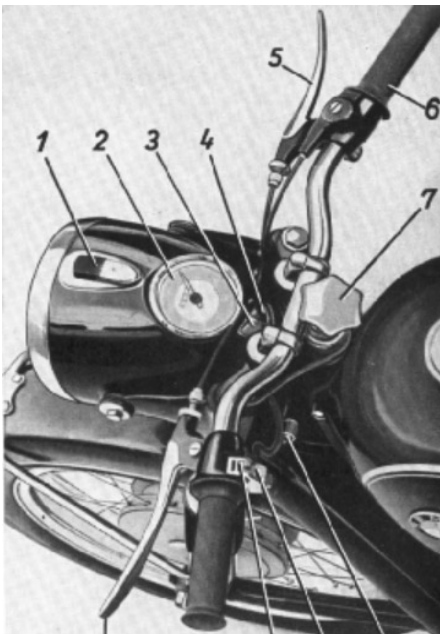
I sold the bike. I expected to enjoy it for many years but when I moved to Japan, I found that although I was able to import it I was unable to register it for the road without upgrading it to meet current Japanese standards. Road registration there would have required different mirrors and electric turn signals, which would have destroyed the look of the bike, and an always-on headlight, which would have depleted the battery in slow traffic. So, sadly, I eventually sold it to a Japanese bike collector for \$6,000, which was more than I initially paid for it but less than what it ultimately cost me.

It is a pity I did not take photos of the interior of the engine, but I did not have a camera that could do it in those days. I only have these photographs . the Dutch license plate, the scored piston, a brazed pushrod, and a lifetime supply of Dremel Moto-Tool bits. I wonder where my old friend is now

Appendix: The BMW R26 Motorcycle



BMW R26 Instruction Manual (1955): 245cc, 15 hp, 4-stroke OHV. Four speed gear box. Front and rear internal shoe brakes. Shaft drive. Slide carburetor. Weight: 158 Kg. Load: 167 Kg. Maximum speed: 128 Km/h.



Adventure Riders' Comments

I previously published parts of this story in the *BMW Mono Revue* (translated into Dutch) (January, 1995), in *BMW Owners News* (May, 2006), and on the *Adventure Rider* website (April, 2014), gratefully receiving this reader feedback:

Very cool story and photos, thanks for sharing!

Big Bamboo

"Memories, dreams, reflections ... with the R25 rider acting as interpreter and advisor, I cut a deal with the brothers over Greek coffee (which is what others call Turkish coffee). "He has new motor. For 2,000 km," brother Vangelis told me, "you must ride it slow." You found out why they said to ride it slow! Cy

Thoughtful story and great pictures!! Thanks for sharing ... and what are you riding these days?

Hardwaregrl

Aw man, I saved just about every picture you posted ... what a GREAT story and adventure. Thank you for sharing, and I know what I will be looking for when I next get to Europe!

Bpeckm

Absolutely brilliant. Thanks for sharing.

Erimille

A while back, I was fortunate to find a few remains of a previous passion (my old racing 1973 BMW 2002 car). Rather than discarding these back to the box in which I found them, I decided to figure out a quick and dirty means of making them a prominent piece of my workspace. Since then I've done this for dozens of other friends (from designing an interconnected art piece of vintage porche transmission sprockets to a building a custom wooden center stand around a 1920's Indian motor). Do yourself a favor and take those parts, make them in to art and hang them on a wall. A daily reminder of the story you shared doesn't sound like a bad way to start the day to me! *Erimille*



TE KOOP
AARDAPPELEN
EIEREN
WIEN